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Susy Hendrix: Thriller Heroine as a Feminist Icon

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Wait Until Dark, written by Frederick Knott in the early 1960s, has long been considered a suspense thriller classic in the theatrical community. Fredrick Major Paull Knott, born in China to wealthy English missionaries on August 28, 1916, was known for his thrilling crime plays full of convoluted plans where something goes wrong. He went to college at Cambridge until duty called in WWII. After the war, he wrote his first successful play, *Dial M for Murder*. He would soon be working with giants such as Alfred Hitchcock, who adapted *Dial M for Murder* for the screen. *Wait Until Dark*, Knott's last play, opened on Broadway in February 1966.¹ It was then made into a film in 1967, starring Audrey Hepburn as Susy. After this success, he never wrote another word. "He was perfectly happy the way things were," explained his wife.²

Wait Until Dark, set in 1966,³ gains much of its appeal through its portrayal of the disadvantaged underdog. Susy Hendrix is blind from a car accident two years before the events of the play. Susy's husband, Sam, has just returned from a business trip to Canada, where a mysterious woman dropped a doll into his luggage by "mistake". Little do they know, the doll is filled with heroin, and the couple is now mixed up in a scheme with three con-artists who want it back. When Susy begins to catch on, the three men must either take care of her or risk exposure.

⁴ I believe that this play's implications and social commentary stretch far beyond that of a typical crime thriller.

¹ Martin, Douglas. "Frederick Knott, Playwright, Dies at 86."

² Grimes, Parker. "About the Playwright: Dial M for Murder." Utah Shakespeare Festival. October 30, 2015. Accessed July 20, 2019.

³ "Broadway Shows by Year - Opened in 1966." BroadwayWorld. Accessed July 20, 2019.

⁴ Knott, Frederick. *Wait until Dark*. Dramatists Play Service, 1995.

The conflict between the antagonistic (predominantly male) and protagonistic (predominantly female) characters mirrors the rise of the Second Wave Feminist Movement and the social climate during the era the plot originally takes place and the time it was written.

The 1960's were one of the most tumultuous decades in world history, encompassing the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and antiwar protests, political turmoil, and the widening "generation gap"⁵. This era saw a rebirth of the feminist movement known as the Second Wave Feminist Movement, or Women's Liberation.

National sentiments towards equality did not regain momentum until President John F. Kennedy's 1961 Commission on the Status of Women, causing rumblings in the soon-to-be feminist community. Then in 1963 Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* was published, igniting the full rebirth of the Feminist Movement. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, her book describes "the problem with no name." Friedan discusses "the pervasive dissatisfaction among women in mainstream American society in the post-World War II period."⁶ Women were pressured to return to their previous oppressed positions after the men came back from WWII, and the detrimental effect it had on them. "The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity... The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love."⁷

⁵ "1960s." History.com. August 21, 2018. Accessed July 20, 2019.

⁶ Churchill, Lindsey Blake. "The Feminine Mystique." Encyclopædia Britannica. September 26, 2018. Accessed July 20, 2019.

⁷ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

A crucial characteristic of the main protagonist Susy of *Wait Until Dark*, a play which is largely character driven, is that she is blind. She was not born blind: the disability resulted from an automobile accident, representing the unnatural disadvantage society forces upon those it oppresses. The con-men spend the entire play trying to take advantage of Susy's disability, resulting in them grossly underestimating her. This specific theme also includes the underestimation and disrespect for the handicapped community. At the beginning of the play Susy feels helpless, no matter how much Sam tries to teach her ways to cope. She is terrified of what would happen to her without the help of her husband, as she has no confidence in herself or her own abilities. "...[S]he feels completely lost without him," Fredrick Knott noted in rough drafts of the show.⁸ Women of the time period Susy grew up in were especially encouraged to rely heavily on the men in their life to take care of them, and this culture is strongly displayed here. After underestimating herself thanks to these outdated standards, Susy gradually comes to realize her own capability for independence and gains the confidence she lacked previously.

Gloria, the other pertinent female character, also showcases the emblematic theme of a sight-related disability, as she has just started wearing glasses. Though it is less dramatic than Susy's, Gloria is bullied at school for having to wear them, marginalizing her. She hates them. The fact that the only two female characters visually present in the show both have a sight-related disability is a significant representation of the adversity that bonds the generations together.

⁸ F.147, p.41

Gloria's situation exposes the invisible problem of domestic abuse, perpetuated by misogyny and the pressure of the "nuclear family"⁹ during that period. Sam hires Gloria to go grocery shopping and other errands or chores to help the handicapped Susy. In Act 1 Scene 2, Susy complains to Sam about Gloria playing tricks on her and generally being rude. Sam responds, "Take it easy on this kid. Her daddy's just left them again, and her mother is out looking for him. She's been battered back and forth like a sawed off shuttle-cock...". Today, her mother's actions may sound desperate, but "if you read the marital advice books of the day, it was considered a woman's responsibility to keep the marriage going no matter what adjustments she had to make. If she complained that her husband was unfaithful, the therapist often asked what she had done to provoke it. The same thing with domestic violence."¹⁰ From her perspective, it makes complete sense for her to try to avoid the blame, humiliation, and stigma of being separated from her husband caused by these sexist societal expectations.

We then see the toxic effect it has on Gloria, who is only around nine during this play. As Fredrick Knott wrote in one of his original descriptions, Gloria's mother "provides the hopeless background to Gloria's life."¹¹ We first notice Gloria's temper and poor coping mechanisms she learned from her father during Act 1 Scene 2, where she mentions that she learned only to throw non-breakables during her father's fits. She also shows a fondness for Sam, possibly because he fills a father figure role, which she is most certainly lacking.

Gloria's situation also has a substantial effect on Susy. Gloria's mother is the only other married woman mentioned in the play, and therefore within the world of the play, she is Susy's

⁹ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*.

¹⁰ "Breaking the Work/Family Deadlock." Harvard Business Review. June 07, 2018. Accessed July 20, 2019.

¹¹ F.148,p.7

only comparison to her own marriage. Knott wrote that the mother “Offsets Suzy. i.e. We should feel that Susy is much better off than Grace”¹² (Grace was the mother’s original name in his rough drafts). The con men attempt to convince Susy that her husband, Sam, is having an affair in order to redirect and manipulate her to give them what they want. For the time period an affair would not be unthinkable, and they expect her to accept their suggestions as fact. Susy is determined not to find herself in the same position as Gloria’s mother. At this point in the show, Susy still depends on Sam on account of her disability and is “terrified of losing her husband”¹³ because she doesn’t know what would happen to her without him. These fears motivate Susy to fervently look for the truth in the accusations, which ultimately leads her to the realization of the con men’s true motives and identities. The mother’s invisible but influential presence serves as a living reminder of a lifestyle the two female protagonists could so easily be subjected to due to their gender. This motivates and informs both Gloria and Susy’s actions throughout the play, giving them an objective to escape such a fate and maintain agency and control of their own lives.

Susy gradually comes to realize her own capability for independence and gains the confidence she lacked previously through a situation where she is forced to fend for herself.

The two protagonists represent the widening generation gap at the time. Susy represents the older generation, someone who came of age during the era of the “nuclear family”¹⁴, and Gloria represents the younger generation, fighting in the revolutions for civil rights and women’s liberation. The last quarter of the play depicts Susy proving her independence; she levels the

¹² F.148,p.7

¹³ F.147, p.41

¹⁴ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*.

playing field by fighting Mr. Roat on her own terms. Her only true ally in this conflict is Gloria, without whose help she would not have been able to succeed. The pair have a quite tumultuous relationship at the beginning of the show, as the two main generations of that era did not easily trust or respect one another. Their relationship soon becomes one of respect, understanding, trust, and teamwork, cultivated during a battle to survive.

Lisa is another female character central to the plot, even though she is dead before it begins. Her part represents the First Wave feminist movement. The first wave feminist movement spanned from 1848-1919, from the Seneca Falls Convention, up to the day women officially received the right to vote on a national scale with the 19th Amendment (with significant lulls before and during the Civil War.)¹⁵ This activism then died down again in the twenties and thirties, after the 19th Amendment. The Equal Rights Amendment, or ERA, was introduced to Congress in 1923 by Alice Paul¹⁶. This constitutional amendment would ensure equal rights to all American citizens, regardless of race, gender, wealthy, or otherwise. Even with the momentum of the recent major victory for women's rights, the ERA struggled¹⁷. Social conservatives, terrified that such a measure would topple existing power structures and traditional values, continued to prevent this from being passed through Congress until the Second Wave Feminist movement of the 1960's-70's. Lisa also represents the women who have fallen victim to this persistent sexism and misogyny, often having their livelihoods taken away, and sometimes their lives.

¹⁵ "On This Day, the Seneca Falls Convention Begins."

¹⁶ "The Equal Rights Amendment." Equal Rights Amendment. Accessed April 20, 2019.

¹⁷ "The Equal Rights Amendment."

Mr. Roat reveals near the beginning of the show “The real brains of the [previous] outfit was a beautiful and talented girl...” Lisa’s death results directly from Mr. Roat’s apparent fear of strong, powerful women. “Lisa was too clever...”¹⁸ he said in regards to her. Gender inequality due to men’s fears of powerful, intelligent women is a historically common theme. An accusation of witchcraft is a classic example of how patriarchal societies have attempted to condemn powerful women. As suffragette Matilda Joslyn Gage explained, “It was simply entrenched social misogyny, the goal of which was to repress the intellect of women.”¹⁹ Mr. Roat embodies this history. However, instead of condemning her, he simply goes ahead and kills her.

According to ACT/SAT Prep Guide, “An ending tends to reveal the meaning (or lack of meaning) in everything that came before it”²⁰. The final action of the play is delivered by an unlikely character, Gloria, who in the last scene stops anyone else from helping Susy with her last line, “You see... she can manage. She’ll be alright.” This moment also gives Gloria the last effective action in the show. The stage direction reads (as italicized in the script) “*Gloria takes Susy by the hand and leads her to the settee, which is the nearest thing Susy can recognize. Gloria leaves her to herself and then, as she backs away from Susy, she picks up a fallen chair, moves another chair, moves a side table, etc., as though she has only one thing in mind- to clear the way for Susy so she can get up the stairs her usual way and without help... As Gloria goes backwards up the stairs [watching Susy the whole time] she says:*”²¹, and then comes Gloria’s

¹⁸ Knott, Frederick. *Wait until Dark*. p.16

¹⁹ Miller, Madeline. "From Circe to Clinton: Why Powerful Women Are Cast as Witches." *The Guardian*. April 07, 2018. Accessed July 20, 2019.

²⁰ Wulick, Anna. "Understanding The Great Gatsby Ending and Last Line." *Understanding The Great Gatsby Ending and Last Line*. Accessed July 20, 2019.

²¹ Knott, Frederick. *Wait until Dark*. p.78

final line. Her actions preserve Susy's agency and independence, also effectively claiming it for herself. This is also a callback to a scene very early in the play, where Susy accuses Gloria of rearranging furniture to purposely trip her up. This juxtaposition helps to solidify the growth of their relationship.²² Susy and Gloria have claimed and preserved their personal agency and independence, even with their individual disadvantages, representing the advancements and accomplishments of the feminist movement during this era.

In Fredrick Knott's own personal notes about the themes of the piece, he states, "The play wants to say a simple basic thing. That to really love someone, you would [have] to be able to train them to do without you..." Though extraordinarily dated in wording, Knott's intent appears clear. He wrote a show about the importance of independence, standing up for yourself, and overcoming adversity.

In the 2013 adaptation, Jeffery Hatcher does change, among other revisions, the last few lines of the final scene. Susan, the adapted Susy, gets the final words as Sam tries to help her up: "No ...I can do it myself... See?". This does make the last moment more centered on Susy and her accomplishments, but take some gravity out of Gloria's character by lessening her presence. The adaptation updates Susan's character for contemporary audiences by having her curse in multiple scenes. Hatcher's version sets the story in 1944, rather than 1966, greatly loosening the connection with the Second Wave Feminist Movement of the 1960s for the audience.

When *Wait Until Dark* opened on Broadway, it played alongside a slew of widely successful, female driven shows: *Cabaret*, *Mame*, *Sweet Charity*, and *Annie Get Your Gun*, to name a few.²³ Fredrick Knott may very well have been following the trend of the time. He

²² Knott, Frederick. *Wait until Dark*. p.22.

²³ "Broadway Shows by Year - Opened in 1966."

obviously had an interest in a woman's role in a crime thriller, which was generally considered a man's plot. His plays almost always had a female character involved in the crime central to the plot in some way: in *Dial M for Murder*, a man tries to have his wife killed, and she catches on; in *Write Me a Murder*, two brothers are trying to get inheritance, and a wife who wants to be a mystery writer is tricked into helping them plot the crime; in *Wait Until Dark*, a blind woman is faced with outsmarting ruthless con-men.

Today, sadly, we are in the Fourth Wave Feminist Movement; sad, due to the fact that we must continue to fight for basic human rights. Sexism reaches beyond race and religion, and the biases and prejudices against those groups. It's a prevailing problem that affects half of the world's population²⁴. This is why this story and its history are so important; to watch a character such as Susy overcome such immense adversity, as well as Gloria make such an impact, is incredibly inspiring for generations young and old who continue to fight for their own independence. Fredrick Knott's *Wait Until Dark* serves as a strong reminder of what we are still capable of achieving.

²⁴ Countrymeters.info. (n.d.). World population.

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